

Phoenix Song

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Britannia is not the only country with ancient legends. Lelouch spends his childhood in the Middle Kingdom.

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Disclaimer: I do not own Code Geass.

Summary: Brittania is not the only country with ancient legends. Lelouch spends his childhood in the Middle Kingdom. AU.

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Prologue: Seeing a Thousand Li

If you wish to see for a thousand li, you must climb - higher.

In this world, there are no heroes.

There may be those who aspire to be heroes, but none have ever truly succeeded in becoming one. These mythic figures whom we look up to as paragons of virtue and symbols of all that is right and good in this world can hardly live up to the pure and moral personae which are ascribed. The idea of the person who refuses to compromise his moral beliefs but nonetheless manages to succeed at every turn is just that - an idea, pleasant to think of, and ideal to reach for, perhaps, but restricted to the realm of fantasy.

And the stories we tell about these larger-than-life figures, are just that. They are stories which bear almost no resemblance to how the actual events played out in history.

Take, for example, our very own Guan Yu. The stories told of his exploits in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms have become

legendary. From his martial prowess to his unwavering loyalty to the warlord Liu Bei, he has an entire legend woven around him. The virtue and compassion of Guan Yu, even today, plays a significant part of our culture. And he is hardly the only example of such things. Everywhere we look, there are heroes, villains, people who were once ordinary men and women who have become a part of the popular lore, where the stories told of them can hardly be said to bear resemblance to the truth.

Every culture has legends.

Arthur. Napoleon. Oda Nobunaga. Thanh Giong. Jing Ke. Lu Bu. Da Yu.

Gradually, their stories have been transformed, warped by retelling after retelling, until the tales concerning the people themselves no longer bear any resemblance to the events as they historically occurred.

But we cherish our illusions, because, without them, there is no façade behind which the ugly truth we would rather not acknowledge can be hidden. Without them, we would be faced with the bare face of reality, devoid of any protection behind which to hide. We would be forced to acknowledge that men do not win wars by being nice and virtuous, that good does not necessarily triumph over evil, and that what is considered evil may be good after all. And that bitter disillusionment is not something which should be forced upon anyone.

Now consider this: a young boy is torn away from the land he calls home, ripped from the only life he has known for twelve years, forsaken by nearly all of his family, with nothing to call his own save the clothes he wears, and accompanied solely by his younger sister, who is even more helpless than he. And, since he is twelve, these are his formative years, the time which comes to define his personality as he grows and develops. Any person would be made bitter and cynical by such an abandonment, and this child is no exception.

So with this impetus, he begins to understand the truth - that the life he has led before has been sheltered, that the world truly does not care about titles or nobility. But without these trappings of civilization, how can he identify himself?

And it is this crisis of identity which shall forge him into the man he will become.

"Lelouch?"

The young boy in question looked up as he heard his name called, gaze eventually settling on his elder sister as she strode towards the wooded copse where he was, relaxing with Euphemia and Nunnally after the conclusion of their morning tutoring session. He waved at her, and waited until she came closer to speak. "Cornelia? Weren't you supposed to be on guard duty today?" He smiled as she gave Nunnally and Euphemia a hug. "I thought you wouldn't be able to meet with us today."

Cornelia shook her head. "Your mother ordered her entire guard contingent to take a leave for the day." She shrugged. "In any case, you and Nunnally should probably stay with Euphie and I tonight. From what your mother said, she sounded like she was planning on conducting some sort of private meeting, and it would probably best if you didn't interfere with whatever business she has." She smiled. "Consider this a formal invitation."

Lelouch looked over at his younger sister. "I would be honored to, Lady li Britannia," she said gravely.

After a second of silence, she burst into giggles, and Euphemia and the others soon joined in.

That night, while Lelouch and his sister slept quietly, the 98th Empress of the Holy Britannian Empire was gunned down in her own home. Neither Lelouch nor Nunnally would find out until the next morning.

The flat expanse of tarmac was empty save for at the foot of the stairs, where a single large black car sat, a single person waiting beside it. The man sighed, and glanced down at the simple watch on his wrist, before adjusting the peaked military cap which rested on top of his head, which proudly displayed a sigil bearing a black nine-pointed star on a crimson background. Gloved hands straightened a crisp, dark blue jacket, examining it for any signs of creases. "Late," he muttered, before standing still one again. Still, he stood there patiently, hands clasped in front of him, seemingly motionless.

A small plane slowly taxied towards the car and rolled to a stop. The door on its side swung open revealing two small children, who slowly descended from the plane. He waited patiently until they had slowly climbed down to the foot of the stairs before giving them a curt bow and opening the door in the back. "Welcome to Luoyang," he said, gesturing at the open door. "Please." The boy nodded curtly at him before climbing in, his sister following suit soon after.

He followed them into the interior and sat down across from the Imperial guests he had been assigned to guard, closing the door after them, and then took off his hat, laying it on the table in front of him. "I am Zhang Lingfu," he said. "I have been assigned as your guardian for the duration of your stay here in China." A moment of awkward silence ensued, punctuated by the ignition of the limousine's engine. He sighed at the boy's stony expression. "Look," he said. "I'm supposed to look after you as long as you're here, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would at least inform me of the circumstances under which you were sent here."

The boy remained silent, instead choosing to give him a withering glare. The girl, on the other hand, seemed more forthcoming. After shooting a quick glance at the boy, she said, in surprisingly fluent Mandarin, "I am Nunnally vi Britannia. My brother here is Lelouch. After our mother was assassinated, our... *father* refused to help us find the people who killed her. When we renounced our titles in protest, he sent us here as political hostages." She shrugged, and

turned to look out the window towards the horizon at Luoyang's cityscape as came into view when the car pulled out of the airport, laying a hand on her brother's before giving it a tight squeeze.

Zhang nodded, satisfied. The Ministry for State Security had surmised as much from what few agents they had within Britannia proper. It was odd that Britannia suddenly, without any prompting, had volunteered to supply political hostages so as to guarantee the passage of a non-aggression pact. However, considering the siblings' rather unique situation, perhaps the court had simply chosen to discard these children, dismissing them as beings of no importance, now that their mother had been killed, and their main benefactor had left into exile. During the briefing, he had been tempted to ignore them, as well - sending these two children, bereft of title and with no support in the Britannian court, to China, was hardly a meaningful gesture.

But, now that he had faces to associate with the simple text profiles he had been given, his earlier disdain melted away. The children were sitting in front of him were just that: children, sent away from their home with nothing but the clothes on their backs, alone and without a single friend to guide them or comfort them. He had seen enough orphaned children during his campaigns in Korea and Indochina already. No child should have to suffer through something like that.

It certainly helped that the Emperor's orders to him for this assignment had been quite explicit. He was to look after these children and answer their questions to the fullest extent that he was able, so long as it did not compromise military security. Zhang looked at the children again. The boy, Lelouch, was still sitting silently, apparently attempting to light the table in front of him on fire with his gaze, while the girl, Nunnally, had instead elected to watch the landscape passing by, slumped in her seat.

He ran a hand through his graying hair, debating what to do next. One one hand, he had his orders, and his sympathies. On the other, there was the deep-seated instinct to simply reject the foreigners, to

dismiss them as *laowai*, and, as such, to relegate them to the category of people to be shunned, or, at least, to be avoided. After a long moment spent internally debating, he made his decision.

"So," he said finally. "Is there anything that you would like to ask me? If you have any questions, I will try to answer them to the extent that I am able."

The boy and his sister looked up at the same time, visibly surprised. The two glanced at each other, and, after a moment, the girl spoke again. "What will happen to us?" she asked, a hint of uncertainty showing in her voice.

"From what I have been told, you are to live in the Imperial Palace in Luoyang with the Emperor and his family. You will live comfortably, and, should you have any requests, I will try my best to meet them within reason." He looked at the boy, who steadfastly refused to meet his gaze. "For now, the Emperor has requested that you meet with him, and that is where we are going right now."

Nunnally looked much relieved, and even the boy straightened a bit, as if an enormous weight had been taken off of his shoulders. "And what about you?" Nunnally asked. "You said you were our guard?"

Zhang nodded. "In some sense, though perhaps it would be best if you did not think of me as a guard. If you have any requests to make, I am the person you should turn to first. I have also been tasked with ensuring your safety, as well." He smiled faintly. "Do not worry about having your freedom curtailed. I am a guardian, not a warden. If you wish to travel through China to go sightseeing or even just to escape the palace, you will be allowed to do so as long as I accompany you."

"I will live with my brother?" the girl asked.

"You will reside together. The Emperor is not in the habit of causing undue emotional harm to his guests." The boy's eyes seemed to soften at that, and Zhang sensed that he had gained some small

measure of trust. "Again, if you have any requests to make concerning your living conditions, do not hesitate to ask. Our only condition is that you must reside within the Forbidden City compound. Do you have any other questions?"

For the first time, Lelouch spoke. "Why," he asked, "were you assigned to be our guard? Why you and not someone else?"

The question was remarkably astute. Normally, foreigners of importance were given a guard detail drawn from the Ceremonial Guard, a group which he very clearly was not a part of. However, it was not exactly common knowledge, and it was not something that a child should be expected to know. Still, the question demanded an answer.

"As I have told you before," he said, "my name is Zhang Lingfu. I hold the rank of Lieutenant General in the NRA, and I am the commander of the 74th Army Group, assigned to the Beijing Military Region. And, as to why I am here guarding you, instead of tending to my troops... The Emperor has ordered me to do so, and it is my duty to carry them out to the letters."

Lelouch nodded, apparently satisfied. After several moments of silence, he flushed slightly, in mild embarrassment, and pulled a small metal case out of his pocket, laying it on the table. "Do you play chess?"

"I do believe that this is checkmate."

Lelouch stared at the board, agape. After a moment of shocked silence, he let out a strangled gasp. "How?"

Nunnally giggled at her brother's uncharacteristic behavior. "You must forgive my brother, Zhang- *xiansheng* . He does not lose much."

Zhang smiled and did not say a word, electing simply to nod in understanding. The boy was quite good, far better than most children his age. It was readily obvious that he did not lose often.

"How?" Lelouch asked again. He glared at Zhang, accusingly. "No amateur plays that well. How are you this good without having played before?"

"Chess is quite the simple game," Zhang said. "If you view it as an abstraction of a battlefield, where the individual pieces are soldiers, or units, perhaps, it is absurdly naïve - it assumes that both sides have equivalent forces, that terrain, weather, and supply are inconsequential, that leadership plays no role in deciding the victor." He looked at the symbol on his hat. "I am a general, Lelouch. I have spent years honing my sense of tactics and strategy. It is my job, and my appointed duty. To me, chess is merely an extension of the decisions which I am supposed to make, albeit one which is decidedly one-dimensional." He grinned at Lelouch's dejected look. "I admit that I have played such games before. Although chess is not played very often here, you may be interested in xiangqi, which is quite similar."

"If you don't like chess, then," Lelouch asked slowly, "what game do you prefer?"

Zhang laughed. "When I was a child, I was too engrossed in my studies to have time for games. The only game of strategy that I have played extensively is weiqi, and even then, it was only as part of my schooling - the teachers at Huangpu Military Academy used it as a training tool, to teach us strategy, vision, and long-term planning. But now that I am a general, the... games I play are not ones in which you would be able to participate."

"Vision?" This time, it was the girl who asked. "I don't understand. How could something like chess teach that?"

Again, while the question was hardly unexpected, the fact that it was a young child that had asked the question was surprising. "Weiqi... is

unique, in a way. Whereas xiangqi is a game of attrition, weiqi is about construction. In a game of xiangqi, or chess as well, I suppose, the locations of the various pieces are not set in stone. Any move that a player makes has very limited long-term influence. Weiqi, however, forces the player to consider the future impacts of a move, as each stone placed on the board will have a measurable effect on the position even a hundred turns later. I suppose you could say that where chess players focus on tactics, people who play weiqi use *strategy* ." He raised his hand, cutting Lelouch off. "While I would be glad to teach you the rules, it will have to wait until later." Zhang pointed to where the walls of the Forbidden City loomed over the car. "We have arrived at the Forbidden City. It would be impolite to keep the Emperor waiting."

Zhang quickly ushered the two siblings out of the car as soon as it stopped, deep in the Forbidden City compound, leading them into an imposing building and through a seemingly endless elaborately decorated corridor. The walls were painted a brilliant shade of scarlet, and a series of murals, depicting events drawn from both mythology and from history, covered the ceiling. As he led the children, Zhang looked up from time to time, pointing out some of the more prominent examples. Princess Iron Fan and Sun Wukong. Wu Song slays the tiger. He stopped when he came to the painting of Guan Yu's thousand *li* journey, just as a short old man dressed in the red and yellow robes of a court official materialized from around a bend in the corridor.

"Cheng- *chengxiang*," Zhang greeted.

"General Zhang," the man responded. "I would like to escort our guests from here." His voice was the voice of a small child - far too high-pitched for a grown man, and Zhang grimaced at the unnatural sound. "The Emperor has informed me that our young guests have been placed under your care, but I feel that it would be improper if I were not here to greet them in person."

Zhang sighed. "I suppose that nothing I can say will dissuade you?" He waited for a moment, but when it was clear that no other reply

was forthcoming, Zhang turned to the children who had half-hidden themselves behind him. "Lelouch, Nunnally, this is Chancellor Cheng Zhong. Please try to disregard his... condition. It is not something he likes to be reminded of."

"It's quite alright, General Zhang. This is something that they will learn of at some point, and it will be much simpler if I explain now, rather than later." He smiled benevolently. "I am one of the last surviving eunuchs of the old Qing Dynasty. You are aware of what that entails, correct?" Lelouch nodded and paled, and Cheng continued. "I was a young boy," he said, "born in the dying days of the Qing. My father started a peasant rebellion, and was captured by the Imperial Army not long after. He was executed, and..." He shrugged. "Several years later, Jiang Jieshi managed to start a successful revolt, and I joined up with him." He blinked. "I see you have a question. Go on, child. Don't be afraid to ask."

"Aren't you angry about what they did to you?"

"I suppose I am, at least a little. But if it hadn't happened, I would probably not be in this position today." He looked at Zhang, who was pointedly looking at his watch. "In any case, there is no use in dwelling on the past and on hypothetical happenings. Come." Cheng swept his arm up to gesture at the empty hallway behind him. "The Emperor awaits."

The Emperor, Lelouch soon discovered, was not what he had expected. Before leaving Britannia, he had been shown pictures, official portraits, really, of the man who he would soon have to answer to, and they had all portrayed the Emperor as austere and majestic. Instead, he was greeted by a unassuming, congenial little man wearing the characteristic yellow hanfu of the Chinese Emperor.

"You must be Lelouch," he said, looking at him, and Lelouch nodded and bowed. "And this is your sister, Nunnally?" the man continued. He heard his sister shifting into a brief curtsey, as demanded by the strict rules governing high-class society in Britannia. "Please," the

man said, "be at ease. I have no use for the restrictions of court etiquette. Personally, I find it all a tremendous waste of time, and I certainly will not demand that you abide by those restrictive rules when I ignore them myself. In any case, please consider yourselves honorary members of my family." He looked up. "General Zhang, Chancellor Cheng, if you would?" The two men bowed and backed out of the room, closing the door behind them. "If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. I know neither of what you have asked General Zhang, nor of what he has divulged." He pulled three dark wooden chairs out from the where they were arranged around a small circular table in the middle of the room, and sat in one of them. He gestured to the other two. "You may sit, if you wish."

Lelouch looked around before sitting down. The room was elegantly decorated, but from the lack of the tell-tale marks of usage on the furnishings and the atmosphere of almost sterile cleanliness, it was painfully obvious that it was not used often. He looked up to the Emperor, then to his sister, and finally to the empty chair. When he turned his gaze back to the Emperor, the man was looking at him expectantly. "Can you tell us about yourself, then?" he asked.

The Emperor smiled. "What would you like to know? I would not mind if you wished that I relate my life story to you, but it would take considerably longer than the amount of time I have at my disposal today. Remember - you will be living here with me, and I will meet with you two if you wish and if I have the time to do so."

"Would you start from the beginning, then?"

He nodded. "Well then... I suppose it begins in the twenty-third year of the Guangxu Emperor, when the Dowager Empress Cixi placed the Emperor Guangxu under house arrest, stripping him of his titles and his power. The common people were not pleased, as he had been a reformer, a person who sought to reverse China's evident decline. They were even less pleased, when, less than a year later, the Emperor was found dead in his study, with a knife in his back. And so they rebelled. At first, everyone thought it would fail. After all,

what could simple peasants do against the strength of the Imperial Army?

"But the army itself began to support the rebellion. First at Wuchang, then elsewhere, they mutinied and rose up, fighting towards the capital, until Cixi herself lay slain in the streets. And then we were without an Emperor. When the Qing fell, all semblance of rule and order in China quickly disintegrated, and many provinces effectively became warlord states. At the time, my father was a young officer who quickly became well-respected after leading his troops to victory after victory against the remaining loyalist forces. After Yuan Shikai declared himself Emperor in Beiping, it was clear to everyone that the Republic of China was an abject failure, that it was ideal that could not be reached. And so, my father raised an army in the south, and, with the help of several of the other warlords, he marched north.

"It took fifteen years. Ten bloody years of civil war, and China was once again unified at the cost of thousands and thousands of lives. In a nod to the Republic that never was, he declared himself the Jianguo Emperor, first of the Min. But he had difficulty in retaining control over the different parts of his empire. The warlords who had assisted him wanted more power. The civilians wanted more power. The bureaucracy wanted more power. In the end, something had to give.

"Not five years after he reunified China, my father died of a sudden heart attack, leaving me to be crowned Emperor when I was nine. I don't doubt that the stress of job killed him. Ever since my father's death, I have sat upon the Dragon Throne. It is a thankless task. You Britannians have a phrase for this, don't you? Something about isolation?"

"It is lonely at the top," Lelouch muttered quietly.

"Yes, that is the one." The Emperor sighed shook his head. "I am afraid that I will have to stop here. I cannot spend any more time here - certain meetings and decisions require my presence." He stood. "I apologize if I have been a poor host. General Zhang should

be back shortly, and he will take care of you. Furthermore, there is someone I would like you to meet, and she will be here, as well. It was nice meeting you, children." He left the room, closing the door behind him. It shut with a click, and the room was bathed in silence.

When the door opened again, several minutes later, it was Zhang who stood behind it, followed by a young Chinese girl not much older than Nunnally. "The Emperor's daughter had expressed an interest in meeting you, and the Emperor did not oppose it," he said, by way of explanation. "Lelouch, Nunnally, this is Jiang Lihua, the Emperor's only daughter. Jiang- gongzu, say hello to our guests."

"Hello," she greeted cheerfully. "I'm Jiang Lihua!" She extended a slender hand to Lelouch, and he shook it firmly.

"I am Lelouch vi Britannia," he said. "This is my sister Nunnally. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Jiang nodded. "I hope you like it here," she said. "The gardens are beautiful in the summer, and there's lots of things to do. I haven't been outside the Forbidden City much, but I already have a list of places that I want to visit. Maybe we can go together!" She looked at Zhang expectantly.

"You will have to ask your father about that," Zhang said. "If it permits it, and you can convince Lelouch and Nunnally to join you, I do not see any reason why you could not go." Jiang smiled and opened her mouth. He cut her off before she could start speaking. "I would like to inform you that dinner should be here shortly." The three children perked up at this.

"What food is there?" Nunnally asked.

"Many kinds," Zhang replied promptly, with a slight smile, and Nunnally giggled.

Jiang grinned. "Since this will be your first meal in China, there's probably going to be some of everything, so you can familiarize yourself with the food and decide what you like the best," she said before clapping her hands. A steady stream of servants began filing in, each placing a small plate with a different dish on a turntable placed in the center of the table. Soon enough, the entire table was covered in food. "Please, feel free to eat whatever you wish," Jiang said. "There will be rice later, and there is tea for you to drink. Help yourselves."

Lelouch could only describe the meal as odd. In Britannia, there had always been some well-defined 'main course'. Here, there was no such thing. In Britannia, he had used an intricate set of forks and spoons, each with a proper use. Here, he used a pair of chopsticks. In Britannia, meals had been solemn affairs, and noise beyond a certain level was heavily discouraged, especially during state affairs. Here, they were noisy, filled with talking and laughing and revelry.

It was only then, as he ate, that he slowly came to realize that he truly was now living far away from the place he had called home, that he was surrounded by people with alien customs and foreign appearance. It was not a pleasant feeling. Still, he put up a front for his sister, and managed to keep it up until after General Zhang assured him that Nunnally was no longer awake, whereupon he promptly cried himself to sleep.

It was not the last time he would do so.

"You called for me, sir?" Zhang saluted.

"Come now, General," said the Emperor. "How long have we known each other? You don't have to stand at attention on my account."

Zhang bowed. "Of course not, sir."

The Emperor sighed, before motioning for Zhang to sit down. "How are the children doing?" he asked, after Zhang was seated.

"The girl seems to be settling in fine, although she does not seem to be as carefree as a child her age should be. Then again, considering the siblings' circumstances, she can hardly be faulted for that. You know how it is."

"Yes," he replied sadly. "All too well. And the boy?"

"Much the same, really. He seems to have taken it upon himself to act as a guardian for his sister, in lieu of a father-figure. They are both still deeply affected by their mothers' death."

"As well they should be. And your assessment of their potential?"

"They are both truly remarkable children. I don't doubt that Lelouch would have made a fine military commander - he certainly has the analytical abilities for it. Furthermore, both he and his sister both seem to resent their home country in some way."

"Lihua will do well to associate with them, then. It is good that she finally has children of her age to talk to. She has been lonely these few years, Lingfu. Ever since her mother died, she has become more and more withdrawn. There is only so much I can do by myself, and the Eunuchs would block me whenever I tried to find someone to be her friend. I suspect you will be dealing with her far more often than you would have thought. Treat her well."

"Of course, sir."

There was a long moment of silence. "Do you know," the Emperor asked suddenly, "why I assigned you to the Britannian children?"

"No, sir."

"You had not wondered? Why assign you to Luoyang, when the troops under your command are stuck in Hebei?"

"You are the Emperor," Zhang said. "It is not my place to wonder about such things. As long as it does not disrupt the defense of the

nation, who am I to complain?"

"My father was a great man," the Emperor said. "But he was only one man, and he could only do so much. Even now, the various warlords seek to wrest themselves from my grasp, and my hold on the outlying regions is always tenuous, even at the best of times. Even now, there are those at court who seek to conspire against me. Maintaining the balance is... tiring. And should I die before my time, as my father did, there will be turmoil not seen since our childhood. And if I should be killed, it is your job to get my daughter and those two children out of Luoyang and into Hebei." He sighed again. "This is, of course a worst-case scenario. It is my fervent wish that my daughter shall not see me die before my time. It is not an experience I would wish on any child."

"I understand, sir."

"No, you do not. Unless you have experienced it, you cannot understand. But I digress. In the event that I die or am killed, you are to work with General Zhang Xueliang to stabilize the country and restore the Emperor to her rightful place on the throne. He is aware of my orders on this, and I have absolute faith in his loyalty."

"Of course, sir."

"But enough of this depressing banter!" The Emperor waved his hand, and a servant appeared with a bottle of liquor and two small saucers. "Here, have a drink with me. It has been far too long since I have indulged myself."

"I'm technically on duty," Zhang protested half-heartedly.

"Drink!" The Emperor laughed as he poured, the clear liquid. "This is an order from your sovereign!"

Zhang smiled, and drank.

A/N: Code Geass, is, while entertaining, somewhat flawed. (Going from prototype to production model in several months? Four generations of Knightmare frames in less than three years?) Notably, the portrayal of China in the Code Geass-verse had many errors. Still, there is much potential to be found in the setting.

Please note that the Code Geass world is essentially an alternate history of our universe. According to the show's timeline, Lelouch was born in 1945 CE, and both Tianzi and Nunnally were born in 1949 CE.

Now, during this time period, in China, perhaps one of the most influential figures would be one Jiang Jieshi. Many people would probably know him better as Chiang Kai-shek. Conveniently, Tianzi's given name is Jiang Lihua - the two of them share a family name. Now, Jiang Jieshi had a son, named Jiang Jingguo had quite a few children, the youngest of whom was born in 1948.

I have made some significant changes to both ours and Code Geass's histories. As a result, this work is heavily AU. Furthermore, I will also be using a host of historical figures and OCs. Depending on the necessity, I may provide character profiles.

Please do not interpret my use of historical figures as 'taking sides' on any sort of issue - they are there because it their presence fits the setting, and there are no other implications involved.

That said, I hope you enjoy this story, and be sure to send me comments, criticisms and the like.